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9 October 1980

MEMORANDUM

IRAN: Prospects for a Military Coup

Summary

Unrest in the Iranian officer corps is the single greatest potential threat to the Khomeini regime. A coup could come from either the left or the right. Disgruntled officers face numerous problems in launching a successful coup, but a serious defeat in the war--such as the loss of all of Khuzestan--would probably embolden coup plotters.

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To date the Khomeini regime has successfully taken advantage of the war to rally Iranians behind the regime. It may be difficult to sustain this support over the longterm, however, especially if significant shortages of domestic fuel supplies develop.

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Although discontent with the Islamic revolution and anti-clericalism has been increasing in Iran for months, the non-communist opposition remains leaderless and unorganized. Virtually every major civilian opponent of the regime has been either forced into exile--including former Admiral Madani--or remains under house arrest--like Ayatollah Shariat-Madari.

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Only the military possesses the strength necessary to offset Khomeini's support among the urban lower class and the Revolutionary Guards. The professional officer corps has

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[redacted]

long been unhappy with the Khomeini regime, and the Islamic regime has claimed repeatedly that it has broken up military coup plots. By far the most serious plot was unraveled last July.

[redacted]

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The Plotters

The military is far from monolithic. The July plot was composed largely of pro-Western officers.

[redacted]

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[redacted] While Iraq undoubtedly is continuing to try to foster a coup, we doubt that many officers are willing to deal with Baghdad or the exiles now that Iraq has attacked Iran.

[redacted]

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A coup attempt could be mounted by leftists in the military and designed to appeal to anti-clericalism.

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[redacted] the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party has been organizing cells among the military, especially the junior officers.

[redacted]

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The regime initiated a major crackdown on the left last summer and banned Tudeh's newspaper.

[redacted]

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[redacted] The Party has taken a low profile since the beginning of hostilities but it may be more inclined than in the past to openly oppose Khomeini if the regime continues to move against it. Tudeh leaders probably will move cautiously, however, because they recognize the Party is still relatively weak.

[redacted]

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A coup plot would probably have the greatest chance for success if the plotters espoused an Islamic revolutionary ideology. We suspect some nationalist junior officers support the Islamic Revolution but are disappointed with its lack of firm direction and its failure to develop a strong military establishment. A coup of this nature might also be launched by disgruntled or power hungry Revolutionary Guards.

[redacted]

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Regime Countermeasures

The Islamic regime has taken numerous measures to prevent a successful coup. The abortive July plot illustrated many of the difficulties plotters face including the lack of a significant base among enlisted men and junior officers, the numerous spies among the officers and the lack of a popular following. [REDACTED]

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Immediately after the revolution the clerics sought to defend their hold on power by imposing a system of revolutionary committees to monitor military activities throughout the chain of command. At the top of the chain of command Khomeini appointed his own representative to report on military loyalties. [REDACTED]

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The establishment of the Revolutionary Guards in May 1979 was also intended in part to serve as a deterrent to coup plotters. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

Khomeini is not in immediate danger but if the war goes badly, coup plotters will be further emboldened. Many officers probably already blame Khomeini for the purges that have sapped the military's strength and for failing to ensure that the armed forces have a reliable source of spare parts and munitions. A major defeat probably would increase the chances of a coup because even more officers would blame the clergy for weakening the military. [REDACTED]

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The fighting has also increased contact among officers and given them new opportunities to exchange views. Shared battlefield experiences have traditionally helped spur Middle Eastern armies toward coups. [REDACTED]

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Finally, the war has boosted the military's prestige which was badly undermined during the revolution. A military takeover has a better chance of gaining some popular approval and legitimacy than before the war. [REDACTED]

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